

Our Mission

To help individuals, teams and organizations reach their potential through strategic planning, innovative coaching, development of team effectiveness and management consulting.

Cook & Company Areas of Concentration

Strategy

Coaching

Assessments

Team Building

Consulting

Corporate Reputation

Training

Workshops & Retreats

Mergers & Acquisitions

Ethical Performance

The Successful Job Interview Process

We are often asked to help individuals “make their case” when being considered for that next important job, be it as CEO, COO, or perhaps another position. And in many other settings, just as an organization always needs to “re-recruit” its employees, so too it is useful for each of us to “re-sell” ourselves in our current jobs (I’m amazed at how few of our coaching clients understand the value of continuing to assess their value to the organization for which they work).

Here are some thoughts that may help you during that process.

Before that important interview or interviews:

It is amazing how many individuals fail to prepare properly before the interview. Key points:

Prepare for the obvious questions:

1. Why do you think you are the best candidate?
2. What do you think are the most important characteristics required to be successful in this job?
3. What are your strengths and how do they relate to this position?
4. What are your development areas, how relevant are they to this position, and how will you compensate for them if chosen?

But there are some less obvious interview strategies that are worth preparing for, or perhaps even “seeding” in an interview. For example:

- Most interviewers, at least when interviewing outside candidates, start with the old saw, “So tell me something about yourself.” A really confident interviewee might counter by saying, “I can certainly do that, but would it conserve your valuable time and help us have a more meaningful conversation if you told me a bit about the job and what you consider to be the most important attributes for a successful candidate? I can then

tell you where – and if – I have those attributes and how I developed them.” Several positives can flow when you, as an interviewee, take this approach:

- You make it clear you understand that there are some critical success factors in the job, thus establishing the strategic mindset that most interviewers want to see.
- You make it clear that you are good “on the fly,” which is a quality that most good managers and leaders need.
- You may in fact save the interviewer’s time, and you will avoid having to figure out how little or much to tell the interviewer.
- Doing homework may also help you as an interviewee determine *in advance* what some of the key attributes for the job may be. If your interviewer says (in response to the above approach), “Actually I’d like you to talk first,” you can respond by saying, “No problem. Obviously I don’t have your perspective, but my sense is that success in this job requires X, Y, and Z. Am I more or less right?” If you are right, you can then go into your past experience as it supports your ability to meet those requirements. If you are wrong, but have prepared, you still can comfortably adapt to the situation.
- Where do you find information that can help you frame the success requirements? From the position description, from others in your organization (if you are an internal candidate), from the search firm (if that is how you were tapped for the interview), or even from company SEC filings, marketing brochures, or speeches and comments on the organization found through Google searches.
- Role play! Again, it is amazing how few interviewees prepare by finding a coach, colleague

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or friend, and having them ask the likely questions. You are *not* trying to memorize answers to specific questions. Rather, you are trying to develop that level of comfort that comes with familiarity with the topics you may be asked about, plus the ability to put together snippets of potential answers in different ways, depending on what questions the interviewer asks. Making sure you prepare for the toughest questions also helps create confidence and very often makes the interview itself seem relatively simple. What are some of those tough questions?

- You've changed jobs fairly often. How can we make sure you won't leave this job just as quickly?
- Your assessment suggests weakness in "X." How could you be successful in this opportunity, given that weakness?
- All of your experience is in "Y," yet this job requires a very different set of skills than your previous success demanded. Why do you think you can be successful here?
- We haven't talked about what is required here. What do *you* think is required for success in this opportunity and why?

NOTE: There is one drawback to role-playing, particularly if you are loquacious anyway—you may find you are going on too long with regard to any single answer. Something to keep in mind.

During the interview:

Some thoughts on making the interview work for you.

- Take every opportunity to relate your answers to the key points the interviewer has previously made. Thus, if the interviewer says that the organization is expected to grow rapidly in the next few years, think about whether the job for which you are interviewing will also involve "scaling up." If so, relate your experience in managing growth as part of one of your answers.
- When asked a factual question to which you do not know the answer, truth is always the best defense. Say you don't know. And if the interviewer seems surprised you don't know the answer, don't be afraid to ask why they are surprised or simply make it clear that that wasn't something you were expected to know in any of your previous experiences. You can even add that you can get back to her regarding the answer if she would like.
- If an interviewer asks a compound question ("What did you know and when did you know it?"), don't be afraid to jot down a word that will help you remember the second (or third or fourth!) part of the question – it shows you are dis-

ciplined and organized.

- Near the end of the interview, if there is an opportunity to summarize the important points and perhaps get one last crack at any issue left in the interviewer's mind, take it ("Then, to summarize, you see this job as requiring X, Y, Z? Is there any point on which you would like me to elaborate?").

After the Interview:

The expression about experience, especially about making mistakes, "You've already paid for the experience (mistake), make sure you learn from it," is never more true than in interviewing.

Most of us can do an "after-action" review of our performance and come pretty close to understanding what seemed to work and what didn't. However, I am surprised at how few people take advantage of that understanding to ask themselves the question, "So what am I going to do differently the next time," even if the next time may be the next interview for the same job. If you have another interview for the same job, it is usually not too late to shift the frame of reference for the next interviewer. And candor is useful, as in, "You know, Joe just asked me the same question. As I was reflecting on our conversation before you came in, I was saying to myself that I wished I had answered his question slightly differently. You've just given me that opportunity, and with the benefit of some thought, here is how I would answer . . ." Unless there is an unusually high premium on quick answers under pressure in the job you are seeking, most interviewers like to see that you are able to continue to learn, and not to afraid to say that you now have a better answer.

Also, sending a thank you, particularly one that adds to the key points you discussed in your interview, should not be underestimated. You and another candidate may be seen as being even in terms of assessed future value to the organization. That one message, with its one additional key insight or clarifying point, may be all it takes to make you the candidate of choice.

Concluding Thought

Effectively interviewing for jobs is an acquired skill for most of us. And it is not about somehow "gaming" the process – if you think it is, you will come across as trying to do just that, and you are not likely to be successful. If you view the process instead as one where you are trying to do the best job of understanding what the job requires, and presenting your qualifications relative to that, you stand a materially better chance of obtaining that position. Good luck!

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